

The Art of Silk Making



Fine silk is actually the product of worms (below center) that eat nothing but mulberry leaves. In ancient China, women tended these silkworms until they spun cocoons. Then the women carefully unwound the cocoons and wove the threads into silk cloth. One of the last steps was to pound the silk to soften it—the task shown at the left. Only wealthy people could afford fine silk robes such as the one below.



LINKS TO SCIENCE

Cloth from Caterpillars

Silk is spun by a type of caterpillar called a silkworm. The silkworm winds a cocoon of fine thread around itself. Before the caterpillar can change to a moth, the fine thread—as much as a mile of it—is carefully unwound from the cocoon. This thread is joined with others to form one thick enough to weave into beautiful cloth. The Chinese knew how to make silk by 3000 B.C.

Once the road crossed the Pamir Mountains, travel was easier. The road passed through Persia and Mesopotamia. Finally, it turned north to the city of Antioch (AN tee ahk), in what today is Syria. From here, traders shipped goods across the Mediterranean to Rome, Greece, Egypt, and other lands that bordered the Mediterranean.

A Route for Goods Few travelers journeyed the entire length of the Silk Road. Generally, goods were passed from trader to trader as they crossed Asia. With each trade along the route, the price of the goods went up. By the time the goods arrived at the end of their journey, they were very expensive.

The Silk Road got its name from **silk**, a valuable cloth first made only in China. Han farmers developed new methods for raising silkworms, which made the silk. Han workers found new ways to weave and dye the silk. These methods were closely guarded secrets. The penalty for revealing them was death.

The arrival of silk in Europe created great excitement. Wealthy Romans prized Chinese silk and were willing to pay high prices for it. And wealthy people in China would pay well for glass, horses, ivory, woolens, and linen cloth from Rome.